Higher Education in Non-Western Societies

Simon Schwartzman

First version of "Non Western Societies and Higher Education", in Burton R. Clark and Guy Neave, *The Encyclopedia of Higher Education*, Pergamon Press, 1992, vol. II, 969-975.

1. The spread of Western university models

From its origins in Western Europe in the late middle ages, universities spread by copying each other, and adapting their features to local conditions. At first, a common language, Latin, a common reference, the Catholic Church, and a common classical heritage, were shared by Paris and Bologna, Prague and Cambridge, Uppsala and Salamanca or Coimbra, and scholars travelled from one place to another strengthening their links and communalities (Le Goff, 1985). Later in the early 19th century, the new or reformed universities in Germany and France, with their emphasis on professionalization, empirical science and modern philosophy, spread their models to all European countries

and the United States, and to all regions reached by Europe's economic, political, cultural and military influence (Ben-David, 1977).

The establishment of Western-type universities in non-European societies since the late 19th century was the continuation of the same process of institutional and cultural diffusion. Whenever universities were copied or adapted, they brought not only their institutional arrangements, but also their values, ways of thinking, curricula, and often their language. The way these patterns were adopted in the new environment depended on whom their carriers and receivers were, and the meaning the new institutions and their associated values took in contexts where the communalities that existed among European societies could not be assumed to hold.

2. The senders

In Asia and Africa, Western educational institutions were transplanted, more often than not, as part of the colonial enterprise (Altbach and Selvaratnam, 1989; Altbach and others, 1989). Some colonial powers, like Portugal or the Netherlands, preferred to keep their higher education institutions for themselves, and did not allow many opportunities for local populations to educate themselves, while the British were concerned with spreading administrative skills to the colonial elites. The differences depended very much on the overall pattern of the colonial enterprise. The British tended to govern in association with the local elites, which they hoped to educate and civilize; the French preferred to treat their colonies as provinces of a unified country, subject to the same rules and regulations, and gravitating, as all France, around Paris; for the Dutch, the Belgians and Portuguese, their colonies were mostly places for economic exploitation, to be ruled by administrative fiat from the metropolis. Differences depended also on the kind of institutions the senders had in their countries, and what they were willing or able to send abroad: French style higher education institutions could not help from being different from the British or the German in their formal organization as well as on the knowledge they imparted, from the role of engineering to the meaning of law education or the way to approach science and research.

Colonialism was not just a matter of military power or economic exploitation, but included merchants, bureaucrats, settlers and missionaries, which combined with local

populations in bewildering patterns of association, assimilation, segregation and hostility. In the United States, Argentina, Australia and Brazil, colonization was carried on through the annihilation or expulsion of native populations and the arrival of European settlers (and in some cases African slaves); in India, Mexico, Peru and most of Africa, colonization was done through different patterns of incorporation of native populations to the colonial rule. In Spanish America the Catholic Church was an integral part of the colonial enterprise, bringing its own educational institutions, establishing their own ways of organizing the population, and creating independent sources of power and influence (Kagan, 1974). In China, India and throughout Africa religious missionaries, often financed by independent churches, gathered the local people around hospitals and schools, and spread their faith, language and cultural values and institutions (for China, see Hayhoe, 1989). The cultural influence of Western Europe since the 19th century went far beyond the boundaries of colonial empires; French was spoken by political and social elites in Russia and throughout Latin America, Japan looked for academic and educational models in Germany, England, France and other European countries, while Germany provided inspiration for the leading North American universities.

3. The receivers

Reception of West European institutional models and cultural values depended very much on the way they linked to local society, and their previous experiences with imported or native educational institutions. Throughout Latin America in the independence years of early 19th Century, and for a long time since, French science and higher education symbolized, for an emerging "criollo" elite, the victory of modern science and rationality against the traditional, religious and aristocratic tenets of the colonizers and their local allies, and was considered an essential ingredient in the building of a modern state. In India, access to education in British institutions and language was seized by traditional upper castes as a way of maintaining their position of power and prestige under colonial rule (Ashby, 1966; Seal, 1968). In Japan after the Meiji restoration, the task of learning and applying Western science and technology was taken by an old and decaying military strata, the Samurai, providing it with a new place under a strongly centralized political regime (Shively, 1971). In Russia, French culture

and French science remained a trait of the aristocracy; in the Arab world, Western language and culture appealed mostly to religious and ethnic minorities, contributing to insulate them still further from the local population and culture. The profound social and cultural differences between senders and receivers could not but lead to serious problems of misunderstanding and translation. Institutions with similar names, organized in similar ways, using often the same textbooks and claiming the same values and goals would produce widely different outcomes, which could not be attributed solely to the limitations of the receivers, or the ethnocentric biases of the senders.

4. Higher Education, social mobility and social stratification

The levels of social prestige, recognition and income associated with university education come always from a combination of what the educated person can actually perform, in terms of learned skills, and the social status attained by their profession in a given society. The two are not always related. A traditional profession such as medicine had probably a higher social standing in the past, when doctors could do very little, than in many societies today, when they do so many things.

In Europe, professional education in the universities came as part of a broad process of social mobility linked to industrialization and urban growth, leading to an effective broadening of the social structure by the emergence of a new and larger middle class (Ben-David, 1977). Education in general, including higher education, was perceived as a means toward increasing social betterment, and the effective mastering of technical skills was a condition for social recognition in the struggle with the more traditional professions. In many non-European societies, on the contrary, knowledge and education along Western patterns became a luxury available only for limited sectors of the upper classes. For them, what mattered most was the possession of modern academic degrees and the prestige associated with the Western intellectual styles.

From its limited beginnings, higher education expanded very rapidly in many non-European societies, in a pattern similar to that of most Western societies. But, while in the West the expansion of higher education coincided more or less with the expansion of industry, the service sector and the Welfare state (and therefore with the creation of large numbers of middle-class jobs), in many non-European societies higher education

expanded very much on its own, creating the conditions for a history of political mobilization and radicalization of the educated which only occurred in Western countries at a much later stage, and with much less intensity.

It is possible to describe the political mobilization of the educated along a three-stage pattern (Schwartzman, 1990). At first, the "new knowledge" provided by higher education was appropriated by small, enlightened elites in their quest of social and political leadership: doctors offered the cure for social illnesses, engineers promised the wonders social planning through urban engineering and big construction works, lawyers had the formula for constitutional reform and state organization. As educational opportunities expanded somewhat and the illusion of technocratic rule faded away, the time came for the second stage, the assertion of professional rights and privileges: medical doctors fought witchcraft and traditional medicine, lawyers asserted their rights to fill in public positions and to be present in all binding transactions, and other professions looked for their own niches of working and payment rights. These two stages were clearly not exclusive of non-European societies (Collins, 1979). Typical of them, however, was the stronger contrasts that existed between the new and the traditional forms of knowledge, the much larger benefits that could be obtained by entering the selected world of the modern and educated, and the scarcity of alternatives. The third phase is characterized by further massification of enrollments and declining benefits. As higher education becomes more accessible to more people, the classic self-employed, liberal professionals tend to turn into salaried white-collars, trade unions replace professional associations, and the fight against further losses in prestige and privileges, rather than the conquest of new spaces, become their prime motivation.

5. From political activism to corporatist retrenchment

The tradition of student political activism in Latin America dates back from at least 1918, year of the University Reform movement in Cordoba, Argentina, which inspired similar movements throughout the continent. Since then, student politics has been a training ground for many future political leaders in Latin America, and in the fifties and sixties Latin American universities provided the cadres for revolutionary movements in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Peru, Venezuela and other countries. Latin American

political refugees in Europe and the United States in 1968 certainly helped to ignite the student explosions of 1968; more recently student mobilization seems mostly a phenomenon of the East, first in Japan, and later in Korea and China.

Student activism is in large part an instance of generation conflict, accentuated by the opportunities for social interactions and the extension of the "youth years" into adult life provided by higher education institutions. This conflict is presumably latent everywhere, but has assumed extraordinary proportions in some special regions, groups and times. Student activists seem to come predominantly from upper middle classes, to study in their country's better universities, and to become particularly active when the aspirations and hopes provided by contact with higher education are frustrated by the slow pace of social and economic modernization in their societies. They are not to be found among lower class students entering the prestigious professions and looking for some kind of vocational training to secure their place in the job market; they are also rare among the children of the upper classes who follow the more traditional careers and have their social and economic standing assured from the beginning.

The decline of student activism in the seventies and eighties was related with the frustrations of the sixties the violent suppression of the urban guerrillas in Latin America and some European countries, the degeneration of a large part of the youth culture into a culture of drugs and social marginality, and the reaction that emerged along what has been called the "me generation." But it was also related to the continuing expansion of higher education that occurred in most countries outside Europe. As the military regimes went down in Latin America in the eighties, the expectation that student politics would revive was not fulfilled. The typical Latin American student now is older than in the past, is very often female, has to work and to study simultaneously, comes from families with little educational background, and does not have the illusions of the previous generations of being the seed of a new and better society. When he acts politically, he fights for short term interests - low or no tuition, cheap restaurants, housing facilities, less demanding academic standards. That these demands are sometimes shrouded in revolutionary terms is less significant than the profound contrast between this defensive agenda and that of their elders.

This retrenchment of student activism from an aggressive demand for leadership into the defense of the narrow interests of their corporation is typical of large sections of the educated in societies where the opening of educational opportunities and the award of academic degrees went far beyond the limits of the job market. For a time, while the private market for the liberal professions overflowed, the public sector took up at least part of the slack. Public universities changed from traditional schools staffed by part-time liberal professionals into teaching institutions engorged by an ever-growing body of full-time teachers and employees; lawyers, medical doctors, engineers and other traditional professions became increasingly dependent on public employment or on government related activities. It is only natural that such organized interested groups resist proposals to streamline the public sector and to improve the accountability public universities.

6. University research

The adaptation of European-type university research to non-European contexts proved to be more difficult still than that of higher education (Schwartzman, 1984). The products of modern science and technology were obvious enough to be desired by most non-European societies willing to participate from the benefits of modernization. The institutions needed to produce them, however, proved to be much more elusive.

The first difficulty was that few of the higher education institutions being copied outside Europe since the 19th century had a place for research. French higher education was known for its emphasis on technical training and culture in science and the humanities, but scientific research as such has been traditionally done in different institutions. British science flourished first as academic endeavors in its more traditional universities in Oxford and Cambridge, but what the British exported was the administrative and technical skills deemed useful for the colonies. Germany, where the ideal of a research centered university was born, was never a major colonial power, and its influence did not reach much beyond Europe (see, however, Pyenson, 1982).

An open question related to the transfer of scientific institutions from European to non-European contexts is how far science depends on implicit cultural and intellectual values and motivations. Scientific growth in the West has been usually associated with the existence of communities of free-thinking intellectuals, skeptical of established

authorities as sources of true knowledge, willing to share their approaches and achievements with each other, open to change their minds if proved wrong, unwilling to submit their scientific convictions to other motivations, and willing to brake away with conventional practices and traditions to learn more (Merton, 1957). However idealized this image may be (for an alternate view, see Latour and Woolgar, 1982) it does include some central features of the most productive scientific communities in Western Europe and the United States; and there are reasons to believe that some cultural traits found in many non-Western societies - the reverence toward authority, the subordination of scientific truth to religious or political dogma, the ritualization of everyday activities - have been inimical to their efforts to enter the world of modern science (Shils, 1961). Japan's successful absorption of Western technology in a profoundly different culture is the main challenge to this thesis. Still, some authors have tried to show how Japanese culture contains traits that are equivalent to those of the West; and anyhow Japanese universities are not particularly noted for their scientific achievements, in comparison with their accomplishments in industrial technology. (Cummings, Amano and Kitamura, 1978; Nakayama, 1989).

Because of these difficulties, modern science was adopted by many non-European countries, predominantly, as ideologies and symbols of culture and prestige, rather than as a lively and productive endeavor. In Europe, positivism and evolutionism, for instance, were from the beginning open theories, intellectual tools developed for coming to grips with the growing complexity of the empirical world of scientific research; in Latin America, however, they were adopted mostly as dogma, ideological weapons in the conflict between liberal and conservative political elites. Teaching of science in many countries is still done by root, and the flourishing of philosophical and epistemologic quarrels in academic circles is just another manifestation of the lack of a true familiarity with the ways scientific work exists as a daily activity. Very few non-European countries have organized a significant research sector in association with their universities. The two most significant cases are India and Brazil (Morehouse, 1971; Schwartzman, 1978; for Latin America as a whole, Vessuri, 1986). In both cases, academic research is concentrated in a few, leading public institutions, and have stronger links with government agencies such as research councils, national academies and other

governmental bodies than with the remaining of the higher education sector in their societies.

7. National systems of higher education

The way national systems of higher education were organized in each country depended very much on how far they broke away from pre-independence institutions and ruling sectors. A common understanding everywhere was that higher education was a public responsibility, to be carried on under direct governmental supervision and control. The French Napoleonic system of centralized education, geared for the training of engineers and civil servants and based on universal access based on merit, was widely adopted. In some Latin American countries, such as Colombia, Peru and Guatemala, the traditional Catholic universities survived and still coexist with the public system. In others, like Mexico, they were wiped out. In the former British colonies most of the institutions established by the colonial authorities were kept and taken over by the new regimes.

Countries responded differently to the pressures for enrollment expansion that intensified after the Second World War, and coinciding, in many places, with political independence. A general trend was the establishment of two or three tier systems. At the top, a few high quality public universities, often working in a foreign language or at least making extensive use of foreign language literature (usually English); then, like in India, many regional institutions, usually with lower academic standards and working in the local language. In several Latin American countries, such as Brazil and Colombia, expansion was absorbed by a large private sector, catering mostly to part-time students from lower social origins that do not pass the entrance examinations for the main public institutions. In others, such as Mexico and Argentina, public universities expanded to incorporate hundreds of thousands of students (the National University of Mexico is the world's largest in student enrollment), even if at the expense of quality. One consequence, like in Peru, was the emergence of some exclusive private institutions catering to the elite, thus compensating for the downgrading of the public sector (Levy, 1980 and 1986).

One would expect short-term vocational training and teacher education to make up a sizeable part of the higher education systems in poorer and less educated societies. The way higher education was introduced in most countries, however, as an instrument for

elite reform and modernization, has made it very difficult for people to accept less prestigious professional carriers. The extraordinary expansion of enrollments since the sixties, and the corresponding devaluation of university diplomas, could have presumably made short term vocational and teacher education more acceptable. One difficulty, however, has been the resistance of the established professions and existing universities regarding non-university types of higher education, which are perceived as threatening to downgrade their institutions and labor market advantages (Psacharopoulos, 1982). The other is the sheer technical difficulty of providing adequate skills to a large number of persons with little previous educational background. Because of these difficulties, vocational and teacher education in most non-European countries have remained a smaller and less qualified portion of their higher education systems than the traditional ones.

8. Prospects and dilemmas

Higher education, a product of Western European civilization, propagated throughout the world since the 19th century in the name of culture, modernization, rationalization, economic development, social equity and well-being. It was peddled by colonial administrations, technical assistance agencies, religious and cultural missionaries from Europe and the United States, and avidly sought after by modernizing elites at the receiving end. It drew money from governments, foundations, churches and individuals, and grew from a few elite institutions into massive systems of hundreds of thousands of students in large campuses. It is fair to ask, at the end of the century, whether this effort has reached its original goals, and to where it is or should be heading.

No contemporary society dispenses with health care, engineering, management, law and basic education, activities that require the kind of competence imparted by higher education institutions. Most countries today can get these skills from their own higher education institutions, and in that sense they fulfill their tasks. At the same time, higher education in non-Western societies has fallen significantly short of more ambitious expectations. In many countries, the introduction of a foreign and more prestigious culture, very often in a foreign language, has helped to increase social differences and to stimulate the immigration of the talented and better educated to Europe or the United

States (Glaser, 1978; see also Okyar, 1975, for Turkey, and Case and Bunnell, 1970, for the Philippines). The quality of education provided has been usually very uneven, with some good institutions and fields, and a large majority of mediocre courses (see, for Brazil, Schwartzman, 1988). Scientific research has at best remained restricted to a handful of institutions, and technical and vocational courses have remained limited in numbers and plagued with problems of low reputation and esteem. Political mobilization of students and teaching staff has been usually strong enough to stop most attempts by governments and central administrations to change the ways that higher education institutions operate (for instance, by establishing academic standards and evaluation mechanisms, by introducing better management and accounting procedures, or by introducing cost-recovery rules), when such policies have been attempted. In inspite of obvious needs, public expenditures for higher education have been reduced in many countries both in absolute and in relative terms since the 1980's, due to competing social demands and the budgetary and administrative crisis of the public sector. This dim picture is related to the much broader phenomenon of economic stagnation and social deterioration that has affected most Latin American, African and Asian countries since the 1980's, after the positive expectations of the previous years. There are of course exceptions, most notably in Asia (Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and of course Japan) but in none of these cases it could be stated that their higher education institutions have played a significant role in their achievements (universal basic education, on the other hand, seemed to have been crucial).

Two opposite policies have been suggested to reverse this situation. The first is to declare that the absorption of Western university models in non-Western societies was a doomed enterprise, and to look for alternatives in other forms of non-Western cultural tradition. The other is to blame the difficulties and predicaments of higher education to the inefficiencies and inequities of the public sector, and to force the universities into the cleansing hands of competitive markets.

The first alternative has been a common theme for intellectuals in Asia, Africa and Latin America and actually tried out by a few countries in some extreme circumstances, the main examples being China during the Cultural Revolution, Iran and other Arab

countries. The results have not been very encouraging. The spreading of Western culture, values and ways of knowledge has apparently gone too far to be reversed, even if not far enough to provide everybody with similar benefits. The task for the future is not likely to be the restoration of traditional cultures, nor the standardization of all societies into the same mold, but the search for new forms of linking (rather than de-linking) cultural specificity and traditions with an increasingly interdependent and communicating world. Regardless of their current predicaments, the academic communities formed around higher education institutions are probably the best existing instruments for this double task. To do this, these institutions should be preserved and improved as places for research and scholarship of high standing, without forsaking the tasks of reducing unwarranted privileges and the need to increase their role as instruments of mass education.

The second alternative has been increasingly put forth by economists in national and international agencies dealing with matters of education, and justified in terms of the obvious inequities, inefficiencies and intellectual stagnation found in so many public-supported institutions in countries facing dire social needs. However, the history of Western higher education shows no examples of countries where teaching and research competence and traditions could grow and mature under the sole logic of sort-term market pressures, and there is no reason to believe that it would be otherwise in other places. The pressures toward market rationality point to the second challenge higher education systems, outside as well as within Western societies, are already facing: how to become accountable to society for resources received, and how to diversify their public and sources of income while strengthening their role as cultural institutions in the broadest possible sense, as well as their intellectual autonomy and leadership.

Bibliography

Altbach, Philip G. and V. Selvaratnam, 1989 - "From Development to Autonomy: The Development of Asian Universities", special issue of *Higher Education,* 18, 1, 1989. (published in an extended version, with the same title, by Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).

Altbach, Phillip. G. and C. H. Davis, T. O. Eisemon, S. Gopinatthan, H. S. Hsieh, S. Lee, E. F. Pang and J. S. Sing, 1989 - S*cientific Development and Higher Education: The Case of Newly Indsustrializing Countries,* New York, Praeger.

Ashby, Eric, 1966 - *Universities: British, Indian, African*. Harvard University Press, 1966.

Ben-David, Joseph, 1977 - C*enters of Learning: Britain, France, Germany and the United States,* Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

Case, Harry L. and Robert A. Bunnell, 1970 - *The University of Philippines: External Assistance and Development,* East Leasing, Michigan: Michigan State University.

Collins, Randall, 1979 - *The Credential Society: An historical sociology of education and stratification*, New York, Academic Press, 1979.

Cummings, W. K, I. Amano and K. Kitamura, editors, 1978 - *Changes in the Japanese University: a Comparative Perspective*, New York Praeger.

Glaser, William A., 1978 - *The Brain Drain - Emigration and Return*, London, Pergamon Press.

Hayhoe, Ruth and Marianne Bastid, 1987 - *China's Education and the Industrialized World: Studies in Cultural Transfer,* New York, M. E. Sharpe.

Hayhoe, Ruth, 1989a - *China's Universities and the Open Door*, New York, M. E. Sharpe.

Hayhoe, Ruth, 1989b - China's universities and Western academic models", *Higher Education,* 18, 1, 49-86.

Kagan, Richard L., 1977 - *Students and Society in Early Modern Spain,* Washington, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Latour, Bruno and Steve Woolgar, 1982, "The cycle of credibility", in Barry Barnes and David Edge, editors, *Science in Context,* Cambridge, Massachusetts, the MIT Press.

Le Goff, Jacques, 1985 - *Les Intellectuelles au Moyen Age*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil (2nd. edition).

Levy, Daniel C., 1980 - *University and Government in Mexico: Autonomy in an authoritarian system*. New York, Praeger.

Levy, Daniel, C. 1986 - *Higher Education and the State in Latin America: Private Challenges to Public Dominance,* The University of Chicago Press.

Merton, Robert K., 1957 - "Science and Democratic Social Structure", in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (2nd. edition), Glencoe, The Free Press, pp. 550-561.

Morehouse, Ward, 1971 - *Science in India: Institution Building and the Organizational System for Research and Development,* Bombay and Hyderabad, College of India and Popular Prakastan.

Nakayama, Shigeru, 1989 - "Independence and choice: Western impact on Japanese higher education", *Higher Education*, 18, 1, 31-48.

Okyear, Osman, 1975 - "Universities in Turkey", *Minerva* 13, 2.

Psacharopoulos, G., 1982 - "Economics of Higher Education in Developing Countries", *Comparative Education Review,* vol. 26, June, 139-159.

Pyenson, Lewis, 1982 - "Cultural Imperialism and Exact Sciences: German Expansion Overseas 1900-1930," *History of Science* 20, 1962, pp. 1-43.

Schwartzman, S., 1978 - "Struggling to be Born: The Scientific Community in Brazil", *Minerva* (London) 16, 4, 545-580.

Schwartzman, S., 1984 - "The Phocus on Scientific Activity", in Burton R. Clark, editor, *Perspectives in Higher Education: Eight Disciplinary and Comparative Views*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schwartzman, S., 1988 - "Brazil: Opportunity and Crisis in Higher Education", *Higher Education,* 17, 1, 99-119.

Schwartzman, S., 1990 - "Changing Roles of New Knowledge", in Björn Wittrock, Peter Wagner, and Hellmutt Wollman, eds., *Social Science in Societal Context: The Policy Orientation and Beyond,* Cambridge University Press.

Seal, Anil, 1968 - *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism - Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Shils, Edward, 1961 - *The Intellectual Between Tradition and Modernity,* The Hague, Mouthon & Co.

Shively, Donald H., 1971 - *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, Princeton, The University of Princeton Press.

Vessuri Hebe M. C., 1986 - "The Universities, Scientific Research and the National Interest in Latin America", *Minerva* 24 (Spring), 1-38.9